



STILL TO COME?



Independence Day in Ukraine is An important holiday indeed, for 17.1% of the population. For 35.2% it is an ordinary official holiday, no different from other official holidays; for other 35.1% it is just a day off; for another 9.4% not even worth a day off. Comparisons with other holidays do not favor Independence Day: the First of May is a big holiday for 31.8% of Ukrainians; Victory Day - for 70%, and Easter - for 80.7%.

The majority of our citizens (56.3%) believe that after eleven years of independence Ukraine has not succeeded as an independent state; 32.4% respondents disagree; and 11.3% are undecided.

Had the referendum been conducted today, less than half of Ukraine's citizens (48.8%) would have voted for independence; one third (33.9%) would have voted against it; 17.3% would have ignored it completely. Among those who voted for independence in December 1999, only two thirds (66.6%) would confirm their choice today.

The reduction in the above numbers has been a gradual process, but over the last year we have given up a very important milestone: while in August 2001 more than half of Ukrainians - 51.3% - were eager to support the independence of Ukraine, today it is less than a half - only 48.8%.

These are the outcomes of the opinion poll conducted by the sociological unit of the Razumkov Center on the eve of Independence Day August 6 - 16, 2002. 2004 respondents 18 and older were personally interviewed in all regions of Ukraine.

Why are we so skeptical about this major holiday? Why, even in western Ukraine, famous for its formidable state-building mind-set, is Independence Day an important holiday for only 40.3% of citizens? Why does the portion of those who consider August 24 a big holiday diminish with age: 27.1% among young people aged 18-19 and declining to 13.2% among citizens aged 40 - 49?

The answer seems obvious: there are few reasons to rejoice, it is more appropriate to feel gloomy. Voting for independence did not only mean moving the capital from Moscow to Kiev; we voted for the right to build a worthy life for ourselves and build it as we see it.

We cannot agree with those who say that we have failed to build an independent state. We did build it. We succeeded in doing something unthinkable in the current civilized world. In such a world, any state is dependent. Firstly, dependent on its own citizens. Secondly, dependent upon the rule of law (and primarily, the rule of human rights law); upon the norms and rules of the international community; upon the obligations taken on voluntarily... Our state is in fact independent from all of the above. Concurrently, very little depends upon our state - neither in the neighboring region, nor in the broader world. That's the way it is.

We have built a state independent of its own citizens, 92% of who believe that they have no influence on central government, 89.9% - on local authorities, and only 0.7% consider that they can exercise significant influence on both, the former and the latter.

86.2 % of citizens feel that they have no control over the state, while only 7.4% feel that they do and 6.4% are undecided on the issue. Even in the west of the country whose population has still preserved a romantic attitude towards the state, only 13.6 % feel they have control over it; among the more pragmatic population in the south of Ukraine only one out of twenty five, or 4%, has this feeling. The indicators for different age groups can only provoke a sad smile: the largest number of those who feel they have control over the state is found among the youngest group, aged 18-19; among the group aged 30 - 39 (the most active working force) only 5.4% believe in it.

We have built a state that violates citizens' right en masse. 91.2% of respondents are confident that their constitutional right to appropriate living standards is not observed; 82.1% consider that their right to work and thus earn their living is violated; 87.7% consider the same happens with the right to medical care and 69.7% - with the right to education. 73.7% are not sure that their children, if they keep living in Ukraine, will be safe and protected from the abuse of their rights and freedoms. These numbers are not just emotional expression of fatigue accumulated over a transition period; they do reveal the unbearable living conditions for the majority of the Ukrainian population.

54.5% said that they had to refuse medical treatment due to financial hardship. In hospitals, we die of pneumonia and influenza because there is no money to pay for basic antibiotics. The so-called "social diseases" have returned, forgotten for more than 30 - 40 years. Since 2001, Ukraine is suffering from the outbreak of tuberculosis; every hour one individual dies from the disease, 80% die in active working age. Ukraine leads Europe in the rate of the spread of HIVS; the disease has gone beyond the boundaries of the risk group and is currently targeting the population at large (500 cases of contamination per month). In some regions, the epidemic threshold has been exceeded three to four times.

Regarding the right to work, the unemployment rate according to the government is 4%; with the International Labor Organization, this indicator is 11.7%. Considering any hidden forms of unemployment, the unemployment rate for Ukraine amounts to 30 - 35%. Those who benefit from their right to work do not always have the chance of a decent living or to have a family while the average salary (377 UHR) nearly equals the minimum living costs for the working population (365 UHR).

We have built an economically inefficient state. The overwhelming majority of respondents (80.5%) are confident that, compared to 1990, the living standards of their families either declined (68.1%) or did not change (12.4%); only 13.5% families reported an improved financial standing. In search of a better life 30% of Ukrainian citizens are eager to leave their motherland, should they have the opportunity. About 2.5 million citizens have already done this and now work in different countries of the world, including those which only recently were considered less advanced than Ukraine.

In trying to justify itself, the government talks about the difficulties of the transition period, the legacy of the previous regime and more and more often about the poverty of the country. It is a lie. Problems of a transition period and a difficult legacy were challenges for all post communist states in Central and Eastern Europe. They did not prevent those states from accomplishing within ten years irreversible market reforms. We have been left behind not only by the states which survived and recovered from shock therapy, but also those which went through a civil war. It shames us to report that Ukraine is a poor state. At the beginning of the 1990s our country had the capacity to be transformed not only into a market economy, but into a welfare market economy. Let's not list all the assets of which Ukraine was in possession of then and which it still has. Ukraine is not poor, but Ukrainians are. Not all of them, though. Those who travel abroad will confirm that no other European capital city can boast of such a number of expensive automobiles (per capita) at a price of 100,000 USD and more. Such a degree of stratification between the rich and the poor is difficult to find elsewhere in the world; in this situation the regulating and stabilizing role of the state is zero.

Lately, we are repeatedly being told about the growth of our GDP, as the highest in Europe, about a two-digit growth in *real* salaries. It is strange that average Ukrainian is unaffected by this growth. Either the "consumer's basket" is being calculated in a strange way, or domestic statistics are too flexible and fixable, but those who regularly go to grocery stores or markets, notice how from month to month their salaries can pay for less and less goods, while utility fees eat up an increasingly larger portion of their monthly income. It is time for the Government to consider the following: why with a background of macroeconomic indicators pointing to stable growth, the population is so very pessimistic about the capacity and future of the Ukrainian economy: only 11.8% believe that economic situation will improve by the end of the year; 28.4% are of the opposite opinion; 44.7% do not expect any changes; and 15.1% (every sixth of respondent) did not have any definite opinion on this.

Our state is in debt and shifts the burden of this debt onto the shoulders of its citizens. We do not always give the numbers our proper consideration. A public (state) debt of 12 billion USD - what does it encompass and how did it accumulate? This amount means that every family of four has a debt of 1,000 USD, or more than 5,000 UHR. To announce this at the meeting of a collective farm would result in a local disaster: the local hospital would soon run out of beds and medicine to treat terrified residents with heart attacks and strokes. 12 billion dollars debt stand for a new imported laundry machine, TV, refrigerator and VCR acquired by each and every family of four at the expense of western creditors. Or, a new homemade automobile "Tavriya" - for

ever record household, also funded from foreign credits. Obviously, our citizens have received nothing of the kind. Probably, the above 12 million US dollars on US credits, the allocation of 1 - 2 million jobs? Even the domestic statistics does not give any evidence of that. Shall we ever learn who took the foreign credits, who allocated funds under government guarantees, who did not return money to the state and in what proportion, who is to blame for the use of the credits, and why do we and our children now have to pay for this? Our state is independent of us and is in no hurry to provide explanations.

We have built a state where fear predominates. The average citizen has many fears: he or she is afraid to lose their job, subsidy for utilities, or petty pension allowance in the future. That is why it is so easy to recruit people, especially public employees, to go to a meeting in support of the authorities; to leave people without electricity, hot water, and even housing; to deprive them of truthful information, civic freedoms and even human dignity.

Businessmen are scared, too. Not only their businesses are jeopardized by the tax burden. They are oppressed by the formula of doing business in Ukraine, which reads "for your business to flourish, you need to be loyal to the authorities or establish family connections with them". Those who do not side with power may not only lose their businesses, but their freedom, too. More than once we have witnessed how the authorities deprived individuals of both the former and the latter and escaped without punishment.

It is common knowledge that a fish rots from its head. At the same time, to remove the scales and clean the fish, one starts from its tail. Ukrainian prisons are crowded with thousands of petty criminals, guilty of stealing a bicycle from the corner of the street or a sheep from a neighbor. As for those who steal millions and billions, they are safe, for a while. Until they break the rules; otherwise the oppressive criminal justice machine is switched on and remains in operation until the defendant fits into the scaffold indicated from the top.

Those in power are also scared. They are afraid to lose power as the source of their income. Besides, one day they can be held accountable. Out of a fear of losing their jobs ministers tell lies to citizens; diplomats deceive the citizens of other states when they publish press releases on democratic elections in Ukraine or the European aspirations of our top officials.

We have built a state, which is constantly in the process of self-empowerment and resistant to any changes. Any power in any country of the world is against transformation and change - this is in the nature of politics and politicians. But how far will the power go in violating the ethical norms and breaking the law in order to preserve the status quo?

The minimum objective for our administrator is to stay in power; the maximum objective is to expand and take on more powers, especially to the extent which allows bribery. For as long as we can remember, our authorities have always lacked power, or perhaps, it is something else which they lack?

Our state will fight for its powers tooth and nail, "breaking all clauses of the election law". We saw this on March 31. Our state, independent of everybody and everything, did not respond to the fact that more than half of the population (58.6%) considers the last parliamentary elections undemocratic and that international observers testify to this. Our authorities have organized even more unconventional by-elections: first in the office of the President of Ukraine to form an obedient parliamentary majority to support the nomination of Volodymyr Lytvyn, later, on July 14 by-elections in three constituencies. International observers did not come to Ukraine for another round of elections in July - they have tasted Ukrainian democracy already and did not want to spoil their vacations.

Among the outcomes of 2002 elections - the above mentioned pessimistic attitude to Independence Day and independence itself, as well as distrust of the coming presidential elections. Only 21.2% believe that the future presidential elections of 2004 will be democratic enough; more than half of the population (51%) thinks the opposite, while 27.8% are undecided.

Victor Yushchenko - the "future and hope of the nation" - may continue to enjoy his high "future president" rating as late as autumn 2004. But evidently, after March 31 and July 14 Victor Yushchenko has realized that he may not have the chance to take part in the next presidential campaign. Or, that rating may have no impact at all in the outcome of the election. Experienced lawyers from Bankova Street [Presidential Administration] will promptly advise a) how not to register an improper candidate; b) how to do away with a nominee already registered; c) how to organize the work of the poll stations and calculate the bulletins; d) how to repeal the results of elections in court, if they are dissatisfactory. From 2000, "best practice" has been accumulated in large volumes, tested, adapted, polished and applied again and again.

What next?

The constitutional majority of Ukrainians from all regions and of all ages do not support the acting President: 77.6% citizens would vote against amendment of legislation which would allow Leonid Kuchma to be elected for a third term; 71.8% expressed a negative attitude, should Mr. Kuchma be nominated for the next presidential elections; and 71.7% spoke in favor of voluntary resignation of the President.

Actions of protest scheduled by the opposition for September are supported by 42.9% of the population, and not supported by 37.4%. We all know that this support is in fact expressed in a passive, verbal form. But we should consider the mentality of Ukrainians, too: they are no longer afraid to declare their intention to support the opposition in front of unfamiliar interviewers. This is a kind of civic bravery.

Leonid Kuchma is not alone to blame for this. The system of power established in Ukraine - partly with our passive consent - is inherently unstable. Kuchma's successors under this system of power will feel as independent of us as his predecessor. The system needs to be changed. But in the state, which we have built, all the issues are resolved by the permission and with the sanction of the first citizen. Naturally, this refers first and foremost to the issue of allocation and redistribution of power. We all remember very well how fiercely Leonid Kuchma has fought to broaden his powers over the last ten years. More than once he has expressed his careless attitude to the Verkhovna Rada, the political parties, the opposition in general and its individual representatives in particular. Our country badly needs constitutional reform, initiated by the opposition. But considering the above, little hope remains for the success of this reform, if implemented by the President's team.

The lower ranks do not want to live in this state any more, but are not ready to fight hard for a better future. Can the upper ranks continue to rule in the old fashion? They can, but not for long. Our patient people, under good governance are capable of miracles. But with our silent and passive people under the existing system of power to launch changes under the current system of power is next to impossible. Will the upper ranks find enough collective wisdom and common sense to break this vicious circle for the sake of the future of the country and its citizens?

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